PREPARATION
ACTS 9.1-2

This morning I am going to preach Part 1 of a two-part sermon dealing with the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

Part 1 – Preparation

Part 2 – Conversion

You have heard me say on several occasions that God is sovereign in salvation. I am sure you have also heard it said that there are no coincidences, only God incidences.

Last week, in ***Acts 8***, we saw an illustration of both of those concepts in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. We will see them both demonstrated again in the conversion of Paul in ***Acts 9***. God set everything in motion for these events long before the main characters ever entered the picture.

Last week, we learned that hundreds of years before the Jews had been dispersed to the ends of civilization, including the region of Ethiopia, carrying the message of God with them.

The eunuch was a God-fearing man who very likely learned about God from these Jews of the Dispersion. He had attained a high office in the palace of the Kandake – the Queen Mother – of Ethiopia and was able thus to travel the great distance to Jerusalem for the purpose of worshipping in the Temple.

Meanwhile, the church had been born in Jerusalem and had experienced great growth until the Jewish leadership felt so threatened by its impact that they began a serious and violent attack on those of The Way.

Following the stoning death of Stephen, the persecution became so bad that most of the Christians fled the city. As they traveled to new places hoping to find safety, they carried with them the Gospel message.

One of those who left the city was Philip, one of the seven leaders chosen in ***Acts 6***. In the midst of a great movement of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of an unknown number of

Samaritans in response to Philip's preaching, God called him to leave the mission in Samaria and travel on the road that led south out of Jerusalem to Gaza.

Philip obeyed the call of God and eventually met the eunuch as he traveled down this same road. Through the reading and explanation of the word of God as recorded in Isaiah 53, Philip led the eunuch to profess Christ as Lord and baptized him in a pool or stream of water that was conveniently located nearby.

God chose the man, the place, the time, and the method by which the eunuch would be brought into the kingdom.

For some reason, we never hear from the eunuch again in Scripture. We do not know if he ever shared his conversion with anyone else (although tradition says he did). Nor is there any evidence that Philip ever told any of the Apostles about the conversion of the eunuch until much later.

In ***Acts 9***, we once again see the intersection of circumstances as events come together to bring another specific man into the kingdom. Once again, the scene of the story is on a road – this time, instead of south to Gaza, the road runs north out of Jerusalem toward Damascus.

The first time we meet the man who would become famous as the Apostle Paul, he is referred to simply as a young man named Saul (***Acts 7.58***) <u>watching</u> over the coats of those who stoned Stephen.

In that same scene (***Acts 8.1***), we see Saul again as a consenting <u>witness</u> of Stephen's execution.

Now, in ***Acts 9.1***, we meet him again. This time, he is an immensely angry young man <u>working</u> to destroy the church, "breathing out threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord."

The reference "young man" in ***Acts 7*** is a relative term and indicates that Saul was somewhere between the ages of 20 and 40. Based on the events of his life and the estimated year of his death, he is probably about 35 years of age at the time of the events in ***Acts 9***.

But what has brought Saul to this point in his life? Is it just fortune that placed him in the midst of these scenes of such a historical moment, or was it something greater than he or any other man could ever have imagined?

Alan Redpath, one time pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, remarked, "*The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.*"

Yet the moment of Paul's conversion was preceded by a lifetime of events and preparation for that very moment of conversion, just as was true of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Saul was born in Tarsus (***Acts 22.3***), a prominent city in the province of Cilicia in Asia Minor – in the southeastern corner of modern day Turkey – to parents who were not only Dispersion Jews, but who were also apparently very prominent citizens of the city of Tarsus.

He was not only a citizen of Tarsus, but was also a citizen of the Roman Empire, which meant he was born into a privileged class of society. The Romans provided a strong structure of law and government – a "framework of civilization that bound the world into a unity."

The *Pax Romana* – Peace of Rome – brought a stability of culture that extended from the Parthian Empire in the east, all across North Africa and the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, through western Europe all the way to Britain and the frontier of modern-day Germany.

The Romans had built roads that were so well constructed that they are still used in many areas even today. The technology of travel under the security of Roman law made travel anywhere in the Empire not only rapid, but safe.

While the government and laws were determined by the Romans, the culture of the Empire was Greek. As a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great 350 years before the birth of Christ, Greek philosophy and culture dominated across the Empire.

Greek was the universal language of the day which allowed for rapid communication. You could travel the length of the Empire

and find someone who could translate for you. Saul himself was able to speak and to write in Greek and to quote Greek poets.

From his many sports-related references (***1 Cor. 9.24-27, Phil. 3.13-14, Heb. 12.1***), he seems to have been exposed to the Greek games at some time in his childhood.

Yet even though Saul had been brought up in this Greco-Roman environment, he was above all things a Jew – a Jew of the Dispersion, exposed to the cosmopolitan ways of the world – yet always a Jew first.

He was born of the stock of Israel into the tribe of Benjamin (as was the first king of Israel, also named Saul) and circumcised according to the Law on the eighth day (***Phil. 3.5***).

He was the son of Jews who had been part of the dispersion of years gone by. He was the son of Pharisees, which means that the line extended farther than just his father (***Acts 23.6***).

Having been born in Tarsus, Saul was a Hellenistic Jew, though he was not a Hellenized Jew. He was raised in a Greek culture, but he did not become Greek in action or philosophy.

According to Saul, he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews" (***Phil. 3.5***). This indicates that Hebrew was the language that dominated his home – evidence of a strict Jewish upbringing, for Hebrew was the language of theological inquiry and debate among Jews.

Saul's everyday language was most likely Aramaic – a language similar to Hebrew derived from the Chaldean language developed during the Babylonian captivity – and very different from that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

His parents made sure that he was taught in the ways of Moses and the Law and the Prophets. At some time in his childhood – maybe following his bar mitzvah at age 13 – Saul was sent to Jerusalem to continue his education in one of the finest Jewish seminaries of the day – the School of Hillel.

His teacher was the very famous and revered Rabbi Gamaliel (***Acts 22.3***), whom we have already met during the trial of the Apostles in ***Acts 5***.

Yet, like his language, the Judaism of Saul was not the same as that of the Old Testament heroes that Saul had studied. Paul's religion also was shaped by the Babylonian exile over 600 years earlier.

Before the captivity, the role of the priest was not just to offer sacrifices, but to teach the people about God and to lead them to worship God alone.

The Law of Moses and the Temple were not at the center of their worship – Jehovah God was. It was their willingness to allow other gods and interests to interfere with their worship of the Lord Jehovah that they were carried off into captivity in the first place.

After the return from captivity and the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple, things had changed:

1. **Idolatry**, the worship of false gods, would never again be an issue with the Jews. At least in that area, the captivity had accomplished its purpose.
2. **Rabbis**, which did not exist in the religious order of Israel before the captivity, had displaced the priests as the primary source of teaching. Rabbis were now the dominant interpreters of the Law.
3. **Scribes**, copiers of the Law, had become prominent and powerful in the religion of the Jews as professional scholars, or lawyers, whose primary purpose was as interpreter and teacher of Mosaic Law.
4. **Synagogues** were another feature of Jewish practice that did not exist before the exile. These became the "center of Jewish education and everyday life" – places primarily devoted to the study of the Law.
5. **Priests**, who were originally the teachers of Israel, had shifted their emphasis to two tasks:
    - Perpetuators of the sacrificial ritual of the Law
    - Political activity

6. **The Law** became the focal point of the Jewish religion. In one sense, the nation was still being somewhat idolatrous in that they still allowed something to preempt God as the focal point of their worship.

The personal relationship sought for and demanded by the God of the OT had been supplanted by the observance of "a moral-ceremonial Law."

Justification came to be recognized as the status only of those who could keep the Law perfectly – something the Pharisees thought was possible and sought to accomplish.

- The culture into which he was born,
- his strict Hebrew upbringing,
- the character of the Jewish religion, and
- the emphasis on the Law

…all of these things were influential in making Saul into the man that he was at the time of this story.

One author of the life of Paul said…

> *God works His will in the circumstances of a person's background…He prepares the vessels of His service to be usable even before they know Him.* (Picirilli)

Hopefully you can see the hand of God in the confluence of events that brought Saul to his divine appointment with Christ on the Damascus Highway.

From such a background, it is also easy to understand the passion with which Saul went about the task of attacking the church.

In his eyes, the teaching that Jesus was the Messiah was nothing short of blasphemy. After all, the writings of Moses very clearly stated, "***…he that is hanged is accursed of God…***" (***Deut. 21.23***)

This Jesus of Nazareth could not possibly be the Messiah. Such teaching angered Saul to the very roots of his being. Now, yielding to his wrath, he determined to destroy the messengers of such heresy.

Acts 9.1-2

When we compare Paul's testimony in ***Acts 22.4*** and ***26.10-11***, it becomes evident that he began his work in Jerusalem but very quickly went in pursuit of those who had fled the city. His journey to Damascus was not his first such excursion.

Chuck Swindoll compared Saul's mission to that of…

- Alexander the Great as he swept across Asia and defeated the Persian Empire, or to
- William Tecumseh Sherman in his "scorching" march to the sea from Atlanta to Savannah.

He was out of control in his emotions, but in control of his senses and realized that he would need the authority of the high priest and of the whole council if he was to be effective in carrying out this mission of extermination.

Armed with the letters of condemnation from the Sanhedrin, he and his companions set out for Damascus, about 135 miles NNE of Jerusalem.

As far as Saul was concerned, he was on the road to Damascus. At this point, only God knew that he was actually on the road to eternal life.

Saul was headed for a divine appointment with the Lord of Lord and King of Kings. Christ was waiting just ahead to bring this rebel into the kingdom of God.

Maybe you ask, "Why review all of that boring history stuff that doesn't seem to matter? Didn't you say this sermon was about the conversion of Saul?"

Yes, I did, but we must realize that Saul's conversion was not just a singular moment in time. It was no accident or coincidence.

Saul didn't just decide one day, "I'm going to get saved."

God didn't just decide one day, "Today, I'm going to save Saul."

This was something God had set in motion from eternity. Everything in Saul's life had brought him to this singular moment when God intentionally and willfully struck Saul down on that road. Here was God bringing His plan for Saul to fruition.

I want you to understand something this morning. Your life is not an accident. Even the fact that you are here this morning is no accident. God brought you here to this place on purpose.

Acts 9.3-5

A goad is a tool a farmer would use when he was plowing or working with oxen. It was a long shaft with a very sharp pointed end that the farmer would use to get the ox's attention or to make him move when he refused.

The prodding by the farmer was irritating or maybe even painful, and many times the ox would kick back against the goad. Yet kicking back made the situation even more painful maybe even drawing blood from the ox.

IN this message, God is the farmer and the ox is Saul. Why was God goading Saul?

Some would interpret this statement to mean that Saul's persecution of the church was his "kicking against the goads." Their belief is that Jesus saved Saul this day to prevent him from persecuting the church.

Yet Saul had been persecuting the church – dragging people from their homes in the middle of the night, casting them in prison, overseeing their trials, having them scourged and even executed – for some time now.

We don't know exactly how long Saul had been persecuting the church – maybe for weeks and months. There is no time span given us. We do know that he has been at it for a while, because his reputation has spread across the country and even preceded him to Damascus.

Jesus could have stopped the persecution any time He wanted.

Paul later writes in ***1 Tim. 1:13 …formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and an insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief***.

It would appear then that the goad that Saul was kicking against was the call of God to salvation.

Verse 6

This time, when Saul used the term lord (*kurois*), he was addressing Jesus as his Savior and acknowledging Him as Lord of his life. He surrendered right there on that road to Jesus, the Messiah.

How could this man who appeared to be so violently opposed to the church and to the person of Jesus as the Messiah suddenly and instantaneously turn and worship Christ as Lord?

It could have happened that way. God can work in any way He chooses, but this statement ***it is hard for you to kick against the goads*** is evidence that God did not work that way with Saul. He had been working throughout Saul's life to bring him to this point of decision.

Later, the Apostle Paul wrote that he had actually been called to salvation and to ministry from his mother's womb. ***Gal. 1.15-16***

Between that time and this day, how many times had God spoken to Saul? Saul had lived in Jerusalem since he was a young boy.

- It could be that Saul heard Jesus' teaching
- May have heard sermons by Peter and John
- May have been present during the trials of the Apostles
- Almost certain he heard the testimony of Stephen
- The resurrection was a fact that none of the Jewish leadership had an answer for because one thing was certain – the tomb was empty.

Saul was an intelligent man and he knew the Law and the Prophets as well as any man alive. Could it be that the events of

the last three years were playing on his mind and his soul? While the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah was so offensive to him, yet the call of God was so strong on his soul that he openly rebelled by attacking the very evidence that was causing him such conviction.

God had been working on Saul for a long time, but Saul kept bucking up against the call of God on his life. He continued to "kick against the goads." He simply would not yield to the call of God.

But God brought him to this particular day and to this particular point on the road to Damascus and brought him to conversion.

Your life is not an accident. God may have been prodding you and goading you and causing you pain and in response, you've been kicking back. But let me tell you that God did not bring you to this place today by accident.

You are here today because God brought you here. It is no accident that I am preaching this message today. We began this study of the book of Acts back in January of this year. This is where we are on this particular day of July 25.

And God brought you here today to hear this message. What is He saying to you?